

MASSIVE MONTANA-ALBERTA POWER LINE OK'D

By Karl Puckett

The U.S. Department of Energy announced Monday it is issuing a permit to construct the \$140 million Montana Alberta Tie Line, which is expected to spark construction of more large wind farms in northcentral Montana.

"This is great news," said Bill Alexander of wind farm developer NaturEner, which has purchased 300 megawatts of northbound capacity on MATL. "It takes us one step closer to certainty to building another project in Montana."

DOE approval was the final hurdle remaining in the path of the project, which will connect the electrical grids of Montana and Alberta at Great Falls and Lethbridge.

The 90-foot-tall poles will span 214 miles, including 130 miles in Cascade, Teton, Pondera and Glacier counties in Montana.

"We've been working toward this day for over three years now," said Bob Williams, vice president of regulatory matters for Montana Alberta Tie Ltd., a subsidiary of developer Tonbridge Power Inc. in Toronto.

NaturEner, which earlier this fall completed the first phase of a 210-megawatt wind farm called Glacier Wind Farm between Shelby and Cut Bank, is prepared to immediately break ground on a second, 300-megawatt wind farm just north of the Glacier project once additional shipping on MATL is a sure thing, Alexander said.

The company has prepaid \$35 million in shipping fees to use MATL, which is being applied to construction costs of the line, Williams said.

MATL also has secured a \$90 million construction loan from a New York bank, said Williams, adding the project will provide a path to market for renewable energy and strengthen the power supply in both markets.

Invenergy, which owns the Judith Gap Wind Farm, and Texas-based GreenHunter, have purchased the south-bound capacity. Company representatives weren't immediately available for comment on their plans.

Secondary shipping space also could be used by the owners of different kinds of generation, including coal-fired power.

MATL, proposed in 2005, drew thousands of comments and often full-houses at public meetings during its three years of environmental review, with opponents raising

concerns over the impact on farming operations, views and birds, and with proponents hailing the jobs and property tax revenue.

"Generally speaking, all of the impacts are low," said Tony Como, the DOE's director of permitting and siting.

The increased cost to farmers who will have to maneuver machinery around the wider H-frames, some placed diagonally, is the biggest impact of the project, he said. To address that concern, 83 miles of single poles have been added to the line, which will cross fewer miles at an angle.

DOE's decision to issue a presidential permit, needed because the line crosses an international border, was published Monday in the Federal Register. The state of Montana and Canadian provincial and national permitting authorities previously OK'd the plans.

Construction will begin in March and take about a year to finish, Williams said.

Tonbridge, which has the authority to use eminent domain, still needs to negotiate right-of-way agreements with landowners in both countries.

"Our objective is to negotiate 100 percent of the agreements," Williams said.

Agreements are in place with 86 of the 300 landowners in Montana, or 29 percent, Williams said. The company has acquired right-of-way from 21 percent of the 113 Alberta property owners.

Tonbridge is offering to pay market value for the easements and will also make annual rent payments, in addition to offering compensation to landowners for crops damaged during construction.

"The amount of the payments is what's in question," said Jerry McRae, a Dutton-area farmer who owns land where the route crosses.

Some of the landowners in Alberta are appealing, with the appeal scheduled to be heard Jan. 13 before the Alberta Court of Appeal, according to Jim Law, a spokesperson for Alberta Utilities Commission.

"If we're successful at the court of appeal, it could still not go forward," said Scott Stenbeck, a Lethbridge attorney representing the dozen landowners.

On this side of the border, Gov. Brian Schweitzer has formed a Landowner Liaison Team to assist in ironing out differences between the company and landowners. Cascade County Commissioner Peggy Beltrone was appointed to the team.